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The Zapruder rip-off

THE prospect of someone getting rich on the Kennedy assassination is unsettling to say the least. But the family of Abraham Zapruder, who happened to be aiming his home movie camera at the Kennedy motorcade the precise moment the president's head exploded from gunshots, wants to make millions from the tragedy.

The government is willing to compensate the Zapruders for the horrifying 26 seconds of 8mm film, but the two parties are about $29 million dollars apart — give or take a few million. The famous pictures are being preserved in a special light and temperature controlled vault at the National Archives.

But the Zapruders have never relinquished ownership. Two years ago the Assassination Records Review board created by Congress urged the government to buy the original footage from the family. It belonged to the people of the United States, the board ruled, providing not only a direct link to that fateful November day 36 years ago but conceivably offering even more crucial evidence that could be uncovered through future technological advancements.

The Zapruder clan is more than willing to make a gift to the nation of their father's film but only for the right price. And it keeps going up. Granted, the initial offer tendered by the government — several hundred thousand dollars — for the assassination caught on camera was lowball. The Zapruder attorneys countered with ludicrously high figures of nearly $20 million.

The price tag has since been ratcheted up to at least $29 million by the family which has taken to comparing the film to great masterpieces of art that easily go for tens of millions at auctions. However, the government is unwilling to pay more than a million for the original item, so arbitrators have been called in to balance the scale between greed and cheapness and finally settle the dispute.

Meanwhile, the Zapruders, who allowed copies of the film to be sold for $19.98 in video stores, have netted a small fortune from the sales. And the family deserves its due for selling the original — an invaluable document of an extraordinary event — to the government. But for Mr. Zapruder, a dressmaker who died in 1970, to be likened to van Gogh or da Vinci, as his family has done, is ridiculous.

His Bell and Howell contribution to a painful chapter in American history is precious for what it recorded, not priceless for what it might fetch on the open market.